

THE DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY GHOST: AN INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the Holy Ghost is one of the most difficult doctrines of the Christian Faith. There is today so much confusion and disagreement over this doctrine that I am glad for the guidance of our Prayer Book in understanding this doctrine. In the way the lessons are planned and the prayers are scheduled, our Prayer Book teaches us. And this Gospel today, for the Fourth Sunday after Easter, St. John 16:5-15, I see as an introduction to this doctrine. I want us to look together at three points.

First of all, when our Lord introduces the Holy Ghost, He speaks of Him as the *Comforter*. Now today a comforter is a fluffy blanket you pull over your head on a cold night, but our Lord uses the term in its Latin meaning, and those of us who studied Latin in Opelika under Miss Margaret Williams—one of the greatest teachers I ever had—know that *comforter* is a compound word. It consists of the prefix *com*, meaning *with*, and *fort*, from which we get *fortitude*, and *fortress*, and in music, *fortissimo*, that is *power, strength*. Christ promises to send to us the Strengthener, because He knows we cannot do it all ourselves. We cannot be the Church all by ourselves. You have made such a great development here in Huntsville, and it is such a privilege to be with you today, for the announcement that you are now incorporated as Christ Episcopal Church. As we give thanks for these developments, let us remember our Lord's promise of the Strengthener to help us, in the days ahead.

In this introduction to the Holy Ghost, the first term our Lord uses is *Comforter, Strengthener*. The second term He uses is the *Spirit of truth*, who will lead us into all truth. And since Christ *is* the truth—"I am the way, the truth, the life"—the Holy Ghost leads us to Christ, to know Him. Remember, at the time our Lord spoke those words, not one word of the New Testament had been written down. Remember, of those hearing those words that day, not one of them ever saw the New Testament as we know it. The New Testament came into being through the guidance of the Holy Ghost, bringing them to remembrance of what He had said and done. And again I am so grateful to our Prayer Book for the guidance it gives us. Step by step it leads us, from Advent to Christmas and Epiphany, then to Lent and Holy Week, Easter and Ascension, step by step it leads us to Christ. I am so grateful for the Prayer Book and for the Lay Readers who faithfully follow it.

I can remember, years ago, hearing Morning Prayer read by a Lay Reader, in a low church parish in the Diocese of Long Island. And the reader was old (you could occasionally hear his false teeth clicking), but I had never heard it read as it was read that morning! And I thought to myself as I heard him, “If you read it correctly, you don’t have to explain it. It explains itself!”

The Holy Ghost is the Strengthenener, to sustain us. The Holy Ghost is the guide, to lead us to Christ. And the Holy Ghost is the One who leads us in worship. “He shall glorify Me...” You remember, very early in His ministry, our Lord spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well, and at that time He announced, “The time cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.” The Holy Ghost leads us to worship Christ, because the Holy Ghost reveals the Risen Lord as present among us here today! Present to forgive, present to strengthen, present to guide us in His way.

And as we offer ourselves in worship to Him, He offers Himself to us: His Body, His Blood, His Life, offered to us. Receive ye the Lord Jesus Christ and the life He gives!

A sermon preached at Christ Episcopal Church, Huntsville, Alabama, on the Fourth Sunday After Easter, 10 May 1998, by The Rev. Hugh B. Hall, Jr.